

Advent II B
Dec. 9-10, 2017
St. John's Cathedral

Some of you know that in a former life I was a journalist – a reporter and city editor at a daily newspaper in the Tri-Cities. I have been told that I still have a serious news addiction – but I'm working on it.

If there's one thing that journalists know, it's how important a 'lead' is – the first sentence of a story. The lead is what grabs you when you read it. It's what gets your attention and draws you in to the story. So reporters probably spend as much time pondering that first sentence as they do pondering the whole story.

When I looked at today's readings, the first thing that struck me is that they have what might be the best 'leads' in the entire lectionary because when we read or hear them we just want to know more. Listen to them

From **Isaiah: Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...** And from the gospel: **The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...** Both of these just make me want to read on. And if I do, I'm drawn into the scriptural story AND into Advent profoundly. Drawn into the deep longings, the deep mystery, the profound hope of this season that offers us both comfort and confrontation.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Have you ever wanted a message of comfort? Most of us have. When we are hurting or lonely. When we are worried. When we are devastated by something that we cannot control. When we

see no hope in the future. We want to be comforted. Held gently. And that was where Israel was when this was written.

The long book of the prophet Isaiah took shape in three different installments that related to three different periods of history. In the part we heard today, Jerusalem was a mess. It had been conquered and much of the population had been marched off to Babylon in the exile. It was a time of utter devastation. Much of the prophetic writing of that time reminded Israel that it was really their fault – that their suffering was punishment from God for their sins and unfaithfulness.

But today we heard something radically different. It is God who commands that these people be comforted. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,’ God says.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to hear that message of comfort and forgiveness and intimacy in a time of great struggle? We can’t help but think of all who are struggling in our time – wondering about the future that seems out of their control. Wondering where the next meal will come from. Wondering if there will be a roof over their heads. If there will be an end to international tensions. And we also ask ourselves what are the places in our own lives where we need the comfort of God’s closeness. What are our places of struggle and challenge – of longing and loneliness? Are those places that make space for God?

The comfort of God is not a pat on the head or a platitude. It is a promise of presence that enters into our struggles and moves us into the future with hope.

The news gets even better as we continue. Not only are the people to be comforted, the penalty for their sins has been paid. They are, in a sense, free. And

God is coming to be with them in a new way. “Prepare the way of the Lord, “ Isaiah writes. God’s arrival will be one of divine splendor, revealing the glory of the Lord.

If you know the music of Handel’s “Messiah,” you almost want to sing along with this. And it is good news that is made for singing.

What this all points to, of course is God shaping a future infused with hope. We Christians see this pointing to Jesus for whose birth we prepare in Advent. Whose coming among us is good news.

And that moves us toward the Gospel – the opening words of Mark’s gospel: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

It’s hard not to read on from that. Who wouldn’t welcome such good news?

Mark is really kind of a no-nonsense gospel. There aren’t any wasted words and, yet, Mark tells the story in amazing detail. He is a copy editor’s dream.

But we notice right away that the story starts in a different place than we’d expect. We’re accustomed to angels and shepherds and mangers and a mystical, magical narrative of Jesus’ birth. A holy night and a mysterious star. Both Matthew and Luke furnish the plot for our Christmas pageants, but this part of the story is totally missing in Mark.

Instead, the beginning of the good news introduces John the Baptist, who, in a way, introduces Jesus – not the baby Jesus but the young adult.

John is Jesus’ (shall we say) eccentric cousin. He is a shaggy, locust-eating, camel hair- wearing prophetic figure who preaches in the wilderness. ‘Repent,’ he says. Repent and get ready for the one who is to come – Jesus. Let down your guard and turn your life in a new direction.

One of the interesting things about John the Baptist is that he drew crowds. Big ones. While today he might be seen as a little scary and certainly odd, people in his time were drawn to him and to his message. And, in a way, John's message had some things in common with the message of Isaiah that we heard in the first lesson.

Certainly both told of God's nearness – God's presence. They both looked to the future that would bring the advent of God among us in a new way. And both addressed deep longings. John was preaching to people who had within them a deep longing for freedom, for comfort, for hope, not unlike the exiled people of Israel. The people of the Judean countryside who flocked to John lived in complicated and difficult times. They lived with the reality of an occupying Roman army. These were not times of economic prosperity. These were people who needed to hear words of hope.

John's message to repent – to turn their lives toward God and to be baptized to wash away their sins was preparation for the one who is to come – Jesus. God is coming. God With Us – Emmanuel. This is how God's promise of presence and hope comes into our lives -- a presence we share with one another in community.

Who are those who need to be comforted? Who are they in this worshiping community—in this neighborhood – in this city -- in those who come into our lives every week? Look around. They are here. We are here, Where is God going to come among us as comforter? Look around again. This is where we meet God.

Advent -- it is an invitation for us to look within. To see where we need to be nudged out of our self-sufficiency and see our need for God. To see how we accept

the invitation to turn our lives around and go in a new direction. A direction that speaks to our longing for God, our call to bear the love that is shared with us.

We wait and watch on these short days of Advent. We prepare to receive this incredible gift of God With Us in humility and hopefulness. We live with an undefended heart.

And as in this Advent prayer from the New Zealand Prayer Book, we pray,

O Come, O come Emmanuel,

You are the way, the truth and the life;

You are the true vine and the bread of life.

Come, living savior, come to the world which waits for you.

Amen